

# **Convoys Are Combat Operations**

By

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FM 101-5-1 defines convoys as, “a group of vehicles organized for the purpose of control and orderly movement with or without escort protection.” For years our doctrine and warfighting focused on a linear, contiguous battlefield, and we trained to this standard. In fact, if we are honest with ourselves, we expected our support personnel to organize and conduct these convoys and to leave the fighting to the combat arms Soldiers. During convoy briefings, you heard little of actions on direct fire contact. If we were really good, we might talk about having our Air Guards up and ready. Times, tactics and our enemy have changed, and the battlefield we face today is non-linear and non-contiguous with an enemy who understands that to attack our strength is to die, to attack our weakness is to be successful. If you were our enemy, where would you focus your fight?

The answer to the question seems to be apparent in the current struggle in Iraq. Our enemy has determined that attacking our convoys is an easy way to defeat our forces and neutralize our strength. He uses Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs), and ambushes to inflict casualties and affect our will to win. Our enemy also appears to favor those convoys that are not combat focused but appear to be conducting an administrative movement. Convoys require application of all combat leadership principles. We are learning and relearning some very important lessons in Iraq, and one is that our peacetime convoy SOPs do not work. We must change the way we train, organize and equip our forces now to insure our convoys are combat focused, can fight and win. We must train our Leaders “How to Think” in order to be proactive versus reactive.

Soldiers, regardless of rank, MOS, or duty, can find themselves in close combat. This is especially so during convoy operations. Some key points that we must begin to make common practice in our forces. 1) First and most important, all Soldiers must be proficient in basic “Individual Soldier skills.” That means our Soldiers are capable of hitting what they

shoot (from various shooting positions), communicating (no matter what the distance or limitations), performing first aid, and reporting accurately. 2) All convoys, regardless of size, need to be equipped with crew served weapons, and the capability to have ring mounts attached. Don't forget the M203 which could then give you some indirect fire capability. 3) Convoy patrol orders and briefings must be conducted and contingency plans must be addressed.

Peacetime habits can prove disastrous in combat. What will you do if there is a wreck or a stalled vehicle? How you will react to snipers, casualties, or ambushes should be governed not by peacetime range restrictions but more by what will kill the enemy. When a vehicle experiences a flat tire, what do you do? Our peacetime training would have us pull over to the side of the road, put on our flashers, place warning triangles behind the vehicle, break out the BII, change the flat, and move on. In some cases, you might call for a wrecker and wait several hours for the wrecker crew to arrive. In combat, the decision to stick to the peacetime procedures can give the enemy an opportunity to attack. A convoy that pulls off the side of the road to fix a flat on one vehicle exposes the entire force to enemy action. An opportunistic enemy might attack using a drive-by shooting. A more organized enemy force could conduct a coordinated attack with mortars, RPGs, and small arms. Leaders have to ask, "Is it better to drive this vehicle with a flat tire to the nearest base camp, or should we follow peacetime procedures and change the flat here?" Maybe you should perform a hasty recovery. The point is that blindly following Fort Backathome's regulations in combat may not be the right thing to do. You must assess the risk based on your knowledge of the situation to protect your Soldiers and accomplish the mission.

Convoy leaders must first understand the tactical problem for their specific convoy operation. Troop Leading Procedures apply to all convoy leaders: **Receive the Mission, Issue the Warning Order, Make a Tentative Plan, Initiate Movement, Reconnoiter, Complete the Plan, Issue the Convoy Brief and Supervise.** Some general principles apply, but each area of operation is unique. Leaders must understand the requirements for the convoy operation in METT-TC terms. As part of your planning, you should look at the requirements against your capabilities. Matching capabilities to requirements will reveal any shortfalls the convoy has relative to the situation. You can base your contingency plans on this understanding.



## CONVOY BRIEFINGS



Route and control methods (i.e. speed limit)  
Timings  
Command and control and reporting  
Recent enemy activity and locations  
Key weapons locations  
Actions at halt (scheduled and emergency)  
Actions on contact  
Supporting assets and call signs  
Units along route that can provide safe haven  
Actions if contact between vehicles or serials occur  
Time and locations of rehearsals and back briefs.

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Leaders must approach all convoys as tactical operations, and all convoys must be organized for combat. Identify the following positions: Convoy Commander, Vehicle Commanders, Combat Life Savers, Lead Vehicle Commander, Vehicle Recovery Teams and Aid/Litter Teams. It is then extremely important for you to organize with a Lead Element, Main Body and Trail Element. The Lead element should be a Gun Truck and ideally have the capability to recover disabled vehicles. Combat Lifesavers and Aid/Litter Teams must be placed throughout the Main Body, and all personnel must know where these Teams are located. The Trail element should be a Gun Truck and, like the lead vehicle, should also have the capability to recover. Gun Trucks are essential direct fire support for convoys and must have, as a minimum, a top mounted automatic weapon capable of 360 degree observation and fields of fire. Communications must be throughout the convoy, and it is recommended that each vehicle have a communications capability, even if it is not secure.



## CONVOY EQUIPMENT LIST



Crew served weapons w/mounts  
Offensive/defensive munitions  
Communications  
Medical Treatment bag  
Stretchers  
Cell phone/s  
Maps  
VS-17 panel  
Tow Strap  
Sandbags  
Ballistic blankets  
Fire Extinguisher  
Fuel Cans  
MREs  
Water

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It has become abundantly clear that certain convoys are hit, or not hit, based upon their readiness. What should be routine or SOP in a convoy? The enemy should always experience a swift, violent reaction to contact in accordance with the rules of engagement. This response to contact should be aggressive, not just posturing on the part of the convoy. To not respond today invites future attacks as the enemy becomes bolder. Convoys that portray an aggressive attitude and appear to be a “porcupine” with weapons out and at the ready are less likely to encounter contact. But it still might happen, so convoys must develop and rehearse contingency plans such as immediate action drills, Sniper attacks, IED attacks, wreck, flat tires and mechanical failures. Preparing for these will save Soldiers lives.

Be aware of potential threats in your area of operation; entrance to alleys, rooftops, overpasses, large crowds, or people who do not fit in with the crowd. Extreme caution must be taken at choke points. If something causes the convoy to stop—be alert. Watch the flanks and have weapons at the ready. All personnel in the convoy must understand some key indicators that something is about to happen; absence of children when normally present, dramatic changes in population, dramatic changes in illumination, vehicles following convoy, broken down vehicles, dead animals, freshly dug holes, obstacles, personnel on overpasses, and the list goes on and on. It is

up to every Soldier in the convoy to “Stay Alert” and be the reconnaissance sensor for his unit.

The list of things you must do seems to be unending and more difficult than at any time in our history. We owe it to our Soldiers to ensure they are trained and ready. Continue to ask questions and challenge your preparation and training of your Soldiers. Do you have a process to debrief drivers and convoy members in order to gather intelligence? Is the convoy looking for anything special along their route? Have we updated convoy leaders on current threats and hot spots? Have we trained drivers to drive FAST and safe? Do drivers know how to maneuver through or around obstacles? Can your Soldiers recognize danger areas? Have we trained drivers to drive at night with NVGs? Have we developed a plan that maintains enough separation between vehicles to allow for maneuver, but prevents vehicles from slipping into the convoy? Have we trained our Soldiers to drive in the center of the road and to avoid pot holes, drainage holes and man-hole covers? Are our Soldiers looking out as they approach overpasses and again, will not let civilians break into your convoy. Are our Soldiers trained to shoot and hit what they aim at? Have we trained our Soldiers to have the heart of the lion—LOOKING and ACTING AGGRESSIVE? Lots of questions, and only you have the answer.